

Entertainment

American Moor

by Kilian Melloy

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Keith Hamilton Cobb stars in 'American Moor' (Source:Courtesy 'American Moor')

For 100 minutes Keith Hamilton Cobb, author and star of "**American Moor**," allows us into his headspace, where private thoughts and reactions he dares not reveal in everyday life frantically bang around looking for what he calls "the emergency exit." Cobb flashes back to drama class (where a Method teacher puts him down for wanting to prepare a solo by Titania from "A Midsummer Night's Dream") and to youthful love affairs. He subjects Shakespeare to textual analysis that unpacks startling insights. More than anything else, he reflects on race in America, and the experience of being an African American male in a society that views such men with instant fear and suspicion.

Cobb's (mostly) solo show provides a revelatory contrast between the world of his private thoughts and the way he interacts with others -- in this case, a white casting director named Michael (voiced by Matt Arnold), who's auditioning actors for the title part in a production of "Othello." This in itself is telling: As Cobb ruminates, it's not like anyone is looking to cast him in traditionally white parts like Richard II. But why not? And why is there such a fixation on Othello being large and virile?

We never see Michael, and we're not quite sure whether or to what degree Michael is visible to Cobb's character, who is also named Keith. But we appreciate the way in which Michael's chipper instructions get under Keith's skin. Michael's requests and observations might sound innocuous enough to our ears, but when we hear them the way Keith does -- thanks to his funny, free-ranging, sometimes excoriating monologues -- we start to understand, a little, just how culturally pervasive racism actually is, and how a long -- and largely un-owned -- history of racism in America contributes to an ongoing, inescapable process of daily scarring for those who are subjected to its demeaning presumptions and the compromises and self-editing that it requires.

Cobb's insights and observations are delivered in a manner that vacillates from the high literacy and delicate construction of Shakespearean language to the more rough and ready vernacular of today. He's unafraid to follow

the text of "Othello" -- and the subtexts of our nation's racial attitudes -- down every available and relevant road. Keith rages and weeps; he also paints such a vivid emotional portrait that we, too, shake with his fury and burn with his sense of humiliation.

As directed by Kim Weild (and with Caleb Spivey providing a crisp and effective lighting design), the 100 minutes of this play zip by. Cobb's energy is unflagging, and his pace unrelenting; he fills the room with movement, energy, and sheer vital presence. This is a rare example of a play about which you can say, without hyperbole, that it's riveting: You hang on every well-chosen, robustly presented word. "American Moor" is both urgent art and an important political statement.

"American Moor" continues at the Plaza Theater, Boston Center for the Arts, through August 12. For tickets and more information, got to www.bostontheatrescene or call the BCA box office at 617-933-8600

[American Moor](#)